



Aestheticism in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats: The Two Byzantium Poems

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I

On April 23, 1925, W.B. Yeats wrote in a notebook, "Yesterday I finished '*A Vision*.'"¹ As he was leaving his home at 82 Merrion Square, intent on sending his illustrator—Edmund Dulac—the very same message, Yeats encountered Monk Gibbon. In *The Masterpiece and the Man: Yeats as I Knew Him*, Gibbon recalls the meeting: "Soon after getting home—possibly after a visit to A.E. at Plunkett House nearby—I encountered Yeats almost in front of the doorway of 82 Merrion Square and plunged immediately into animated and friendly conversation with him . . . Ordinarily this impetuosity and ebullience would have met with little favour from W.B., but on this occasion, and by a happy accident, it was welcome."² Gibbon's account suggests that the completion of *A Vision* was the reason for Yeats's relief: "it was interesting to have been present on the day when—as he imagined—his toil had been completed."³ Indeed, Yeats's favorable mood was likely due to his completed project, of which he wrote, "It has really been the book I think that made me ill—for it has not been out of my mind for years."⁴ But extensive revisions, and the process of integrating his philosophy into the later poetry, tell a different story. Yeats had not completed a theory; instead he had posed a series of ontological questions.

In *A Vision* Yeats maps out a complex philosophical system of opposites aimed at categorizing history. He also develops recurring themes and images for his poetry; one of which announces an infatuation with





Byzantium that began on a trip to Monreale where he and Ezra Pound viewed Byzantine mosaics.⁵ He writes:

*I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend
it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before
Justinian opened St Sophia [AD 537] and closed the Academy of
Plato [AD 529]. I think I could find in some little wine shop some
philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions,
the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for
the pride of his delicate skill would make what was an instrument
of power to Princes and Clerics a murderous madness in the mob,
show us a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body.*

I think that in early Byzantium, and maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that architect and artificers—though not, it may be poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract—spoke to the multitude and the few alike.⁶

This passage illuminates Yeats's concern with aesthetics. Ultimately the questions that appear in the Byzantium poems are derived from his thoughts on the early Byzantine state, and they ask us to consider aesthetics epistemologically. One way to approach W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" is to read each poem as a set of aesthetic questions. Much of the work done on the Byzantium poems that follows the publication of *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems* (1970) merely rehashes tired concerns: Yeats's inspiration for the poem's images, his interest in the ancient city of Byzantium, his fascination with the tension between human decay and unchangeable artifacts. What has been ignored, in both seminal works on the Byzantium poems and in recent scholarship, is an excavation of Yeats's aesthetic concerns.

But why have scholars not looked at aesthetic concerns in Yeats's Byzantium poems? It might be the shift from feminine Decadence to masculine Modernism that holds the answer. Karl Beckson argues in *London in the 1890s*, "As women achieved greater independence and challenged male authority in the fin de siècle, images of seductive fatal women became widespread in literature and art, as though men sensed





the possibility of their own marginalization.”⁷ There was a movement in the early 1890s for the masculinization of English studies, when the patriarchy of literature refused to acknowledge Decadence and aesthetics because it was a feminized trend. Indeed, Ann L. Ardis, in *Modernism and Cultural Conflict 1880-1922*, suggests, “During the next several years [those following 1893], however, other critics will be quick to link the feminization of the literary marketplace in the 1890s with the ‘degeneration’ of both literary standards and the culture at large.”⁸ It is possible that critics have unintentionally followed this trend to look at more “masculine” concerns such as politicalization of art. Yeats also fell into this role, but eventually divorces himself from politics to focus on mysticism (*A Vision*) and aesthetics. Yeats’s return to aesthetics reinforces Pater’s and Wilde’s influence on his poetry. Beckson points out:

*Richard Ellmann has written that Yeats spoke derisively of ‘that decadence we call progress’ and that the avant-garde of the fin de siècle regarded the true decadents as those stolid Victorians who accepted the ‘acquisitive, insensitive, unimaginative world, with all its morality, sincerity and seriousness.’ In such a culture, the serious artist felt increasingly alienated, his rebelliousness intensifying as the nineteenth century came to an end, and with the early twentieth-century rechristening of Aestheticism and Decadence as ‘Modernism,’ the artist’s rejection of the bourgeois audience led to an increasingly difficult, obscure art.*⁹

I approach Yeats as a metacritic using art as a philosophical medium to explore ‘new aestheticist’ concerns: What is the purpose of art? How should we approach art? And what does an aesthetic object ultimately do? Through analysis of the two Byzantium poems, Yeats’s awareness of his role of artist as metacritic, and therefore his aesthetic theory, may be defined. I will juxtapose “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” to show how this pairing predicts recent aesthetic concerns. Positioning the poems together calls attention to Yeats’s metacritical angle, which has been previously overlooked. But due to a growing interest in returning to aestheticism (what has been termed new aestheticism) Yeats’s critical slant is likely to be of interest to scholars of Decadence and Modernism. Before addressing Yeats’s aesthetic concerns it is necessary to historicize the central questions of aesthetics: What is the definition, purpose, and





value of art; and what is the definition, purpose, and value of criticism?

Art, as an aesthetic object, has two interrelated elements: its meaning and its construction. In their introduction to *The New Aestheticism*, John Joughin and Simon Malpas emphasize, “[The new aestheticists’s] understanding of the relationship between art, truth and interpretation is not merely dependent on an openness to the fact that literary texts transform meaning, but is also equally concerned with asking *how* this revelation is to be construed.”¹⁰ In making this statement, Joughin and Malpas suggest that if a text were merely informative and not aesthetic, we wouldn’t read it more than once. It is clear that Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic concerns have been taken up by various ‘new aestheticists’: Consider, for instance, Cyril’s argument in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”: “There is no doubt that whatever amusement we may find in reading a purely model novel, we have rarely any artistic pleasure in re-reading it. And this is perhaps the best rough test of what is literature and what it is not. If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use in reading it at all.”¹¹ Art cannot be defined by its surface nor its substance alone; it must elicit a cognitive and a sensual response.

Another complexity lies in defining art as idea or object/event—Does art depict an object or an idea of an object? This problem was contemplated by Timothy Binkley in his article “Piece: Contra Aesthetics” that appeared in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1977), and further explored by M.C. Beardsley in *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1981). Whereas Binkley champions ‘idea’ as the more interesting or important aspect of an artwork, Beardsley’s ‘exhibit’ example convinces me that art cannot be defined as mere ‘idea’; it is ostensibly necessary that the ‘idea’ be documented as an object/event.¹² It follows that the idea and the object/event are married to surface and substance in what is referred to as the ‘art object.’

For Yeats, the art object seems to provide a cultural study, and its value is determined not by mere verisimilitude, but by the whole of its being: Surface (form) is as much a cultural marker as substance (content). We should also perceive art not only as critique or representation, but also as an object/event in historical reality. That is, as part of the ontological





universe. Art is both reality and representation. In other words, art is experience and perception, and can provide truth because it is a socially influenced product and a contemporary cultural study. In his article "Willean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: Consumer Fashion at the Origins of Modernist Aesthetics," Paul Fortunato demonstrates that Wilde, throughout his oeuvre, acknowledges a consumer modernism: "For Wilde, to create a work of art necessarily entails the desire to impact a large audience."¹³ Furthermore, Fortunato argues, "Whenever one creates, one does so keeping in mind the cultural moment, as well as the mass audience at that moment of history."¹⁴ Fortunato rightly argues that because art is objectified in consumer culture, it is necessarily a historical object/event. As a result it is important to question, as George Schlesinger does in "Aesthetic Experience and the Definition of Art," whether art has an internal, expressive quality or if the perceiver projects quality into/onto the work of art.

It is also important to distinguish between the artist's intention and what the work itself expresses. I believe questions of intentionality are essentially meaningless because such questions are pure speculation, and even if told by the author herself there is no way of validating the intention under which the art object was produced. Therefore, we must distinguish criticism about the art from criticism about the artist. In his most well known work, "Guide to Aesthetics," Benedetto Croce argues that "Neither the artist who produces art, nor the spectator who contemplates it, has need of anything but the universal and the individual, or, better still, the universal individualized: the universal artistic activity, which is all epitomized and concentrated in the representation of a single state of mind."¹⁵ Croce insists that the existence of the art object depends on the production and contemplation of the object/event as an interrelated phenomenon wherein the object and the observer both project meaning—an 'aesthetic experience.' In sum, an aesthetic experience is the active, cognitive perception and emotional appreciation of an art object.

We must also define criticism's role in the aesthetic experience. In his essay, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," Walter Benjamin succinctly establishes the primary role of aesthetic criticism:





"Criticism in its central intention is not judgment but, on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute."¹⁶ If—as Vivian suggests in Wilde's "The Decay of Lying"—"art never expresses anything but itself,"¹⁷ and we describe aesthetic experience as both the active, cognitive perception and the emotional appreciation of the art object, then the critic's purpose is to help others increase aesthetic pleasure through explication, elucidation, and interpretation. Criticism adds to an art object, making it a new work of art. Similarly, in Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert argues: "[Criticism] treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it."¹⁸ Consequently, the critic is not merely an interpreter of an art object, but a sort of cultural guide whose job is, in Benjamin's words, "far less the judgment of a work than the method of its consummation."¹⁹ Art and criticism are interarticulated.

In "What comes after art?" (2003) Andrew Bowie observes: "There are an indefinite number of different ways of approaching cultural products. The crucial issue is, then, how we are to arrive at the ability to choose approaches which are most revelatory and most productive."²⁰ He further suggests that "the real challenge is . . . to steer a course between mere theoretical 'knowingness' and mere unreflective aesthetic enjoyment."²¹ What Bowie implies here is that while the critic may be considered an artist, the artist may likewise be considered a critic.²² I draw this conclusion with the help of one of Bowie's fellow 'new aestheticists'—Robert Eaglestone. I quote a large portion of his original text, "Critical Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge, and the Truth of Literature" (2003), because it is this theory that I apply to Yeats:

The 'what is it about this artwork that...?' question may also be a mistake because it may be that each work of art reveals truth in a unique way which, if it allowed for any description, would ask for a unique description or act of criticism, one for which no rules of description or criticism, would fit.





Perhaps only an innovation in critical language would be able to describe it. (This is perhaps what happened with Anglo-American literary modernism: the practitioners—Eliot, Woolf, Pound—had to be great critics as well as great artists in order to describe and think through what they were doing . . .) Yet can there be an altogether new language, let alone an altogether new critical language? Or perhaps no critical metalanguage could describe a work, leaving all ‘criticism’ to take place in new acts of artistic creation (‘All serious art, music and literature is a critical act’).²³

My argument is that this ‘altogether new language’ is indeed a new ‘critical metalanguage’ that ‘take[s] place in new acts of artistic creation’—namely Yeats’s poetry. He uses art as a critical medium.

One difficulty that arises from treating Yeats’s poetry as a philosophical medium, one with its own methodology that (I claim) criticizes criticism, is employing an approach to the poems that is both useful and meaningful. The structure of my analysis is closely related to Beardsley’s methodology: explication, elucidation, and interpretation. According to Beardsley, “The problem of *explication* is, briefly, to determine the contextual meaning of a group of words, such as metaphor, given the standard meanings of the words plus information about their ranges of connotation.”²⁴ Conversely, *elucidation* is to determine that which is not explicitly stated—such as where is the speaker and what is his situation or motivation? Finally, Beardsley believes that the problem of *interpretation* is “to determine the themes and theses of a literary work, given the contextual meanings of the words and a complete description of the world of the work.”²⁵

II

In “Including Transformation: notes on the art of the contemporary” (2003), Andrew Benjamin argues, “Art’s truth . . . lies in its capacity to bear different and conflicting interpretations.”²⁶ As poems written at the height of Yeats’s creative and influential powers, and as such central to his poetic career, the Byzantium poems have been the subjects of many scholarly conversations, to which this study adds a fresh layer. In his introduction to the landmark collection of essays, *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems*, Richard Finneran suggests that the basic subject of “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” is ‘Nature versus Art.’ Although





certainly in these poems “Nature and art are necessarily and inescapably interdependent,” I maintain that this well-explored duality represents only one layer in these poems’ inquiry into the nature of aesthetics.²⁷ By focusing on Yeats’s presentation of art’s ability to conquer the mutability of nature because it is eternal, many critics (Finneran, F.A.C. Wilson, T.R. Henn, and Edward Engelberg) have overlooked the deeper problems of metacriticism addressed in the poems. Henn observes that through an analysis of this duality, “Yeats can crystallize the thought of the permanence of art in a world of mutability.”²⁸ But this is not Yeats’s ultimate concern. He interrogates, in addition, art’s purpose. And Croce would argue that “art criticism, when it is truly aesthetic or historical, through its very process develops into the criticism of life.”²⁹ Granted the poem does deal with life and death on one level, the generally accepted interpretation of the Byzantium poems (that the poems are “contemplations of death—or rather of the ideal state after death”)³⁰ rests upon the questionable assumption that authorial intention is an important factor in aesthetic criticism. Beardsley explicitly states that criticism based on authorial intention is not sound because “we can seldom know the intention with sufficient exactness, independently of the work itself, to compare the work with it and measure its success or failure. Even when we can do so, the resulting judgment is not a judgment of the work, but only of the worker, which is quite a different thing.”³¹ And so I approach the poems as two halves of a whole aesthetic theory—one dealing with the concrete art object, the other interested in the abstract idea of the art object.

In his comprehensive study of Yeats’s poetry, John Unterecker observes: “Perhaps the most important single fact to bear in mind as one looks at that bitter section of his work Yeats called *The Tower* is that it is only half of a complex pattern that is completed in the following section, *The Winding Stair*. The two groups of poems balance each other not only in their obviously related titles but in carefully opposed points of view.”³² The pattern making of *A Vision*, and more specifically the opposition theory illustrated by the gyres, can be seen by pairing the Byzantium poems of these two collections. In the first, “Sailing to Byzantium,” the physical reality of Byzantium is stressed. Accordingly, the aesthetic questions posed





in the poem deal with the art object: What is the purpose of art? And how should one approach art (what is the purpose and method of criticism)?

The starting point of the poem is an image of the life-cycle: natural ageing is illustrated as 'the young in one another's arms' become 'old men.' The speaker labels 'birds in the trees,' 'salmon,' 'mackerel,' and 'fowl,' as 'Those dying generations'—depicting that 'Whatever is begotten' eventually dies. In lines 7 and 8, Yeats uses the life-cycle to set up tension between emotional temporality and cognitive persistence. Said another way, the narrator—in using the phrase 'The Dying Generations'—introduces the contrast between sensuality and the intellect by pairing these aesthetic responses with mortality and immortality, respectively. By definition, then, 'Whatever is begotten, born, and dies' (in other words, whatever is natural) is not 'Monuments' (or, art). In Stanza I the speaker sets up a criticism against *l'art pour l'art*, claiming that hedonistic pleasure-seeking does not allow for cognitive interaction with the art object: "Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect." This final sentence of Stanza I suggests the complex nuance of a work is lost if the audience is only concerned with sensual (surface) experience. Much of Yeats's poetry resists mere sensuality because his language remains ambiguous. Thus, as it is defined above, the aesthetic experience would not be complete if the sensual experience did not develop into a cognitive reaction.

Although the question posed in Stanza II is not explicit, we can infer from the incomplete aesthetic experience that closes Stanza I that the speaker is interested in questioning how to approach art. The flame imagery of the Byzantium poems is generally read as representing "purgatorial flames, well enough known from orthodox Christian symbolism."³³ This interpretation, however, overlooks another key reading: the flame as a metacritical image. The recurring image of fire in Stanza III serves as a critical anti-pattern—it is ever changing. The voiceless body of the 'aged man' must rely on his 'soul [to] clap its hands and sing.' This unnatural act of a soul disembodying itself in order to study monuments from different perspectives echoes Walter Pater's claim in his conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it





might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike."³⁴³⁵ Along the same lines, Gilbert, in Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," argues that "each mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood, and . . . we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent."³⁶ Therefore, if we apply this theory to Yeats's poem, the speaker seems to divorce his soul from his body in defiance of a bored aesthetic experience. In short, lines 15-16 suggest the speaker agrees that criticism's process should not be stale: In Pater's words, "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions."³⁷

Consequently, the connection between fire and criticism ostensibly endorses subjectivity because the critic's approach must change on a whim and, like the unpredictable flame, there is no consistent (objective) element of a fire beyond its heat. Thus the art object itself may shift form without changing its fact of being. The flame illustrates Croce's 'universal individualized.' Croce's theory, explained in section I of this paper, is extremely useful because it sheds insight on Schlesinger's difficult problem: Does artwork have an expressive quality or does the perceiver project quality into/onto the art object? Because the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium" is concerned with the purpose of criticism—ultimately seeking an answer to how we should approach art—it is important to decide whether the art object itself has any bearing on our approach. Stasis (even a static critical point of view) terrifies the speaker of this poem. And stasis in Stanza III echoes lines 41-58 of "Easter 1916":

*Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;*





*A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.*

*Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.*

These lines insist on the consequences of stasis. The speaker calls attention to a series of images (horse, rider, birds, clouds) that change 'minute by minute,' and by their action the environment around them also changes: the stream is diverted. These natural, kinetic images are juxtaposed with the static image of the 'stone' that 'trouble[s] the living stream.' The beginning of the following stanza (lines 57-8) explains the extended metaphor of lines 41-54. Though "Easter 1916" ostensibly reflects the speaker's disenchantment with the single-minded zealotry of nationalist politics, the distrust of stasis here is also relevant to critical inquiries embedded within "Sailing to Byzantium." The speakers of "Easter 1916" and "Sailing to Byzantium" would seem to suggest that critical perspective should mimic the fluidity of the flame in "Sailing to Byzantium" and the water in "Easter 1916." The contemporary transcendental essayist Daniel Duane observes: "Unlike so many other passions: while one might, I suppose, wish for a bloom to remain in blossom, for a ripening grape to hang always on the vine—yearnings John Keats made his own, for fleeting beauty and youth, the understandably hopeless hope that we might freeze our world's better moments—the wave's plentitude is rather in the peeling of the petal, the very motion of the falling fruit."³⁸ There is a comfort in artifice that can be traced back from Yeats through Wilde and Pater to Joris Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours*, in which Des Esseintes desires art over nature because it is 'against the grain.' Even in *A Rebours*, a Decadent novel that instigates the *l'art pour l'art* movement, the aesthetic object has a utility. Yeats is interested in to what end is it used.

Yeats's frequently quoted gloss on the mechanical singing birds of





Stanza IV exposes a negativity that contrasts with the speaker's hope to become an immortal, static artifact: "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang."³⁹ Yeats's description here of the birds as 'artificial' anticipates the later poem, "Byzantium," in which the speaker seems to have a dramatically changed attitude towards art. This change in tone, as well as the first four words of Yeats's note—"I have read somewhere"—should lead us away from seeking authorial intention and historical influence as definitive avenues for interpretation: intention is inconsistent, and influence is not convincing. As a result, the ultimate purpose of the poem as a whole is to pose *the* aesthetic question: What is the purpose of art? The speaker seemingly celebrates the fact that he desires to become mechanical artifice (the gilded, singing bird) whose only purpose acknowledged here is 'to keep a drowsy Emperor awake' and 'to sing to lords and ladies.' The ambivalence in this final image of gilded aestheticism allows for the open speculation necessary of a philosophical question. In Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert reminds us that, "the one thing not worth looking at is the obvious."⁴⁰ After all, Gilbert continues:

*It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone, which while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and, taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself.*⁴¹

As a metacritic, Yeats resists a definitive interpretation of his poetry. In this sense, "Sailing to Byzantium" is significant as an example of Yeats's aim for ambiguity, which, in Gilbert's words, "make[s] all interpretations true, and no interpretation final,"⁴² thus suggesting that the critic's purpose is a subjective appreciation of art's utility that creates a new useful object.

III

In contrast to the concrete images of "Sailing to Byzantium,"





"Byzantium" focuses on the spiritual dimension.⁴³ The setting has changed from the material to the immaterial world. Accordingly, the questions posed in this poem are more abstract: Is art the object or the idea of the object? And what does an aesthetic object do? And anticipating Yeats's later poem "Man and Echo" ("Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?"), "Byzantium" asks: Do artistic ideas alter lived experience?

The point of departure for "Byzantium" is a disagreement Yeats had with English poet and long-term friend, Sturge Moore (1870-1944), who wrote in a letter, "Your *Sailing to Byzantium*, magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies."⁴⁴ R. F. Foster reports that Yeats was in complete disagreement with Moore, and "within a fortnight he was making notes for a poem about Byzantium."⁴⁵ Yeats, in fact, traced the poem's genesis directly back to this letter: "[*'Byzantium'*] originates from a criticism of yours. You objected to the last verse of '*Sailing to Byzantium*' because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition."⁴⁶ We shall see then, that "Byzantium" complicates and completes the aesthetic issues Yeats set out in "*Sailing to Byzantium*."

The first two stanzas of "Byzantium" open with a change of setting (evening in a sort of Hades as opposed to the material world), and a shift in point of view. Consistent with Pater's demand that the critic always be 'courting new impressions,' Yeats gives voice to a new speaker: a Byzantine shade witnessing the approach of a figure who approximates the narrator of the first poem. In an attempt to transmute the temporal into the timeless, the speaker juxtaposes the aesthetic accomplishments of the 'great cathedral' and its 'gong' with the 'mere complexities' of man. To avoid re-treading arguments celebrating the eternal over the temporal, the new aestheticist would ask, "What does this image do?" as a lead in to "what does this poem do?" And ultimately "what does an aesthetic object do?" Yeats addresses the first, and most basic, of these questions,





by juxtaposing the image of the 'great cathedral' against the complexities of man to parallel the art versus nature dichotomy presented in "Sailing to Byzantium." This is an important tension because Yeats questions the validity of binaries, and illustrates the interconnectedness of art and nature—an interesting concept that will be taken up in Section IV of this paper.

Stanza III returns to the image of a mechanized, singing bird that ends "Sailing to Byzantium." Foster argues, "The gold bird reappears, defined (in deference to Sturge Moore) in clear contradiction to 'natural' life, but it rapidly gives way to the spellbinding supernatural image of a soul dancing in a purifying fire."⁴⁷ Foster does well to remind us of the correspondence between Yeats and Moore concerning this image, but the image of the bird does not 'rapidly give[] way' to Stanza IV. In addition, Foster's literal reading of the 'purifying fire' that burns in the fourth stanza ignores the critique of aestheticism at work here. Most Yeats scholars readily agree that the 'changeless metal' bird is the central image of the Byzantium poems. We should not, however, concede that its purpose is to merely celebrate art's timelessness. There is also a metacritical texture to this image. G.S. Fraser points out:

*The three key words of the first line [of Stanza IV] give us, with marvelous compression, our three prevailing views since classical times of the nature of a work of art. For the Platonist, the golden bird is 'a miracle'; it depends on supernatural inspiration. For the Aristotelian, it is a 'bird'; it is a work of art because it is an imitation of nature. For more prosaic, or less profound, minds it is 'a golden handiwork'—what the critic should attend to is the worth of the material and the care of the craftsman."*⁴⁸

Fraser's summary of classic approaches to art engages a Kantian mode of critique in that he is interested in what the bird represents rather than what the bird, as an art object, does. This approach is too narrow because it overlooks Yeats's exploration into the purpose and value of art. Recent work being done in the field of new aesthetics has re-raised interest in the abstract functions of art. In other words, the interest in the image has been replaced by an interest in art's ultimate purpose. The speaker of "Byzantium" engages in such aesthetic criticism. He presents the artificial bird as neither Platonic, Aristotelian, nor prosaic, but rather as a nearly





useless artifact. As Yeats concluded in "Sailing to Byzantium," the bird's (as representative of an art object) only purpose is to provide entertainment to the Byzantine aristocracy. Justifiably, the bird in "Byzantium" does not sing, it 'scorn[s] aloud' all that is natural—all that is different from it. How, in this case, does the angry artifice help us define Yeats's aesthetic theory? In truth, it is only half of a complex thought. And to understand Yeats's philosophy of art we must recognize art's role in life as well as art's interarticulation with criticism. To do so, it is important to widen the scope of meaning in Stanza IV as Fraser has begun to do by arguing that the poem invokes Aristotelian and Platonic theories in order to act as a critique of itself.

Flame imagery, so important to the two Byzantium poems, completes the marriage of art and criticism. On the literal level, the mosaic streets are engulfed in a self-created and self-sustaining fire upon which the Byzantine night-walkers dance in agony. But the agony is not due to pain: The flames 'cannot sing a sleeve.' In a metacritical poem (in which abstract aesthetic questions are wrestled with), the 'idea' cannot sing an 'object.' Not only does the speaker inquire as to the purpose of this image, but also the image itself questions art as idea or art as object. In order to fully explore the possibility that each (idea and object) might be the true form of art, Yeats produced two poems: "Sailing to Byzantium" celebrates the material artifact and "Byzantium" insists that art is the idea behind the object. After all, the flame 'cannot sing a sleeve' because, in the words of Gilbert from "The Critic as Artist," "Art does not hurt us."⁴⁹ Thus Stanza IV represents an aesthetic experience. Put another way, the art object (or, rather, the idea behind the object represented by the flame) plus the active, cognitive and sensual perceptions ('agony of trance,' not pain) of the speaker yields a critical response. In short, this image is both an aesthetic experience and a critical reaction to that experience, and thus in this image Yeats articulates the interrelatedness of art and criticism.

In *Oscar Wilde*, Richard Ellmann emphasizes what he sees as a cardinal difference between Yeats's and Wilde's ideas concerning the purpose of art: "Unlike Yeats, who says that works of art beget works of art, Wilde believes that works of art murder works of art." For Wilde, "Each new





work repudiates its predecessor, as its successor will repudiate it.”⁵⁰ Certainly Stanza V of “Byzantium” coincides with Ellmann’s claim: The speaker observes, “those images that yet / fresh images beget.” We should, however, note that the same action occurs in each artistic creation; meaning, ‘murder’ and ‘beget’ both replace one work of art with another. As a result, the only difference between the aesthetic thought of Yeats and Wilde, in Ellmann’s argument, is the language used to describe an action. The actions themselves are identical. Both authors seem to be in agreement: Art—like criticism—should not be static, but fluid. This idea can be mapped from Pater to Wilde and Yeats. I again draw on Daniel Duane’s observations to augment the speaker’s final image of the ‘gong-tormented sea’: “Water [is] an element that, like fire, one can watch endlessly” because of its perpetual motion.⁵¹ Thus, for Yeats, each represents change, or progress. It is not coincidence that allots the sea the final word in “Byzantium.”

Like the flame, water imagery plays a central role in Yeats’s aesthetic theory, and it is important to connect the Byzantium poems to an earlier poem—“The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water”—to call attention to Yeats’s interest in aesthetics early in his poetic career. “The Old Men” employs water as a tool of reflection, or criticism:

*I heard the old, old men say,
‘Everything alters,
and one by one we drop away.’
They had hands like claws and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
By the waters.
I heard the old, old men say,
‘All that’s beautiful drifts away
Like the waters.’*

‘The Old Men’ lament the loss of youth’s beauty. The poem is narrated as a recount of what the speaker overheard old men saying about their lost youth as they looked into reflective waters. The description of the old men as having ‘hands like claws’ and ‘knees [that] were twisted like the old thorn-trees’ points to a connection between nature and art, which will be an important connection to make as I set up section IV of this paper.⁵²





To make this connection, though, we must view youthful beauty as an aesthetic object. In “Phrases and Philosophies For the Use of the Young,” Wilde argues that “one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art,” thus surface beauty, for Wilde, is indeed aesthetic.⁵³ This cornerstone concept in Wilde’s aesthetic confirms late 19th century aestheticist’s interest in the interarticulation of art and criticism with life.

IV

Up to this point I have exposed a previously overlooked metacritical trend in Yeats’s poetry that is now of considerable interest due to the resurgence of aestheticism via the new aestheticism movement. Throughout I have offered Pater and Wilde’s theories (which directly influenced Yeats) alongside these new aestheticist ideas to investigate a system of metacritical imagery always visible in Yeats’s poetry that has been previously overlooked.

In the penultimate poem of his collection, and one of the last poems he wrote, Yeats addressed the question of art’s utility. “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” begun in November 1937, was completed in its anthologized form in September 1938.⁵⁴ Section III closes the poem with a tour of Yeatsian imagery: a trash heap that addresses the poet’s role in transforming the ugliness of urban landscapes into beautiful artifacts.

III

*Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.*

The art objects, his circus animals, are for show; here, their only purpose—like the artificial Byzantine bird—is to entertain. But the listed items once had a function beyond collected refuse. The old kettle could have been used to boil water; bottles and cans may have held various





liquids. Old iron, bones, and rags could have been ornamental—though their function was to add beauty long ago, they still claim the same purpose in a different manner. That is, originally the objects were for pageantry, now they serve to illustrate the multiple functions of art. In short, they are metacritical objects. Yeats's question is still, "Does art make any difference in reality, if at all?" I argued in Section I of this paper: "The art object's purpose is to provide a cultural study, and its value is determined not by mere verisimilitude, but on the whole of its being: Surface (form) is as much a cultural marker as substance (content). We should also perceive art not only as critique or representation, but also as an object/event in historical reality, that is, as part of the ontological universe. Art is both reality and representation. In other words, art is both experience and perception, and can provide truth because it is a socially influenced product and a contemporary cultural study." These items are at once aesthetic objects and cultural markers because they represent the society that used and discarded them. It appears that Yeats arrived at a philosophy that sees art as a socially influenced and socially influencing product—what I will call *holistic aesthetics*. What is at stake in combining these two terms is the realization that art, criticism and life are inseparable. Yeats's two Byzantium poems serve as both aesthetic experiences for the reader and critical reactions to the aesthetic experience. We can read the gilded, mechanical bird much like the items in "The Circus Animal's Desertion," in which Yeats articulates the interrelatedness of art ('kettles,' 'bottles,' 'bones,' and 'rags') and criticism (their utility in society and their post-utilitarian function as aesthetic objects in the poem).

Holism is a philosophy that views all existence in unity under a single entity which gave birth to all existence, and is commitment to join together all that has been fragmented. The OED attributes J.C. Smuts with coining the term in 1926 in *Holism and Evolution*, and describes it as "the whole-making, holistic tendency, or Holism, operating in and through particular wholes, is seen at all stages of existence."⁵⁵ It follows that Holistic aesthetics is a philosophy that sees art and life as interarticulated. Holistic aesthetics supports two seemingly contradictory views necessarily dependent upon one another: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates





life”⁵⁶ argued by Vivian in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” and “the transformation of life into art” (art’s imitation of life) in Yeats’s early story, “Rosa Alchemica.”⁵⁷ Holism shares the Greek root *σῶλος*-*hòlòs*, meaning *whole*, with a model that successfully illustrates this basic principal that everything is part of the One: the hologram. “A hologram is a special sort of photographic glass plate which will project a three-dimensional image when laser light is shone through it. The remarkable trait of the plate is that, if shattered, each fragment will still project the whole picture, with a loss of detail or resolution only. In short, each part contains the whole.”⁵⁸ In a holistic philosophy, then, art’s purpose cannot be purely aesthetic; it must be involved culturally because it is part of the reality that is human existence. As a metacritic interested in the purpose and value of art, Yeats realized this link and explored its significance in his work.

I see this belief in *unity of being* recurring throughout Yeats’s oeuvre, which is deeply engaged with the aestheticisms of the late 19th century. Especially interesting is Yeats’s Gyre theory that illustrates the concept of interconnected opposites, which he defined in “Part One: The Principal Symbol” of *A Vision* (1925):

If we think of the vortex attributed to Discord as formed by circles diminishing until they are nothing, and of the opposing sphere attributed to Concord as forming from itself an opposing vortex, the apex of each vortex in the middle of the other’s base, we have the fundamental symbol of my instructors.

If I call the unshaded cone “Discord” and the other “Concord” and think of each as the bound of a gyre, I see that the gyre of “Concord” diminishes as that of “Discord” increases, and can imagine after that the gyre of “Concord” increasing while that of “Discord” diminishes, and so on, one gyre within the other always. Here the thought of Heraclitus dominates all: Dying each other’s life, living each other’s death.”⁵⁹

I am reminded of James Joyce’s reason for writing *Ulysses*.⁶⁰ While in Zurich working on the novel, Joyce told his friend Frank Budgen, “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book.”⁶¹ Joyce saw in his work a cultural importance that many modernist writers believed existed in all art. Incidentally, Joughin and Malpas claim that





modernity's central concepts derive from "a self-conscious discourse about the necessary interrelations of knowledge, morality, culture and history..."⁶² Thus the holistic teachings of William Blake ('seeing the world in a grain of sand') or Lao-tze (recognizing the 'macrocosm in the microcosm') translate into the philosophy of art as holistic aesthetics. Yeats, like his contemporaries Wilde and Joyce, recognized the value of interarticulating art and criticism into a unified cultural product. Without such a realization, Yeats's poetry—in which we can now see his more nuanced critical concerns—would be nothing but *l'art pour l'art*.

Notes

- 1 W.B. Yeats, Notebook entry: 23 April, 1925, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- 2 Monk Gibbon, *The Masterpiece and the Man: Yeats As I Knew Him* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), 77.
- 3 Gibbon, *The Masterpiece and the Man*, 82.
- 4 Yeats, 23 April, 1925, HRHRC.
- 5 Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 300.
- 6 W.B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Collier Books, 1978), 279.
- 7 Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 41.
- 8 Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict 1880-1922*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 54.
- 9 Beckson, *London in the 1890s*, 45.
- 10 John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, "An Introduction," *The new aestheticism*, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.) (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 8.
- 11 This and subsequent citations of Wilde's work are from Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, J.B. Foreman (ed.) (London: Harper/Collins, 1966), 977.
- 12 In "The Ontology of Art" (1981), Beardsley argues, "When the conceptual work of art is exhibited or sold or loaned, it is the document that is so treated, after all, not its 'idea,' and not any events or states of affairs it refers to" (xxiv). This example necessarily attached the idea of the object/event to the object/event and vice versa. See Note 20 for full citation.
- 13 Paul L. Fortunato, "Willean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: Consumer Fashion at the Origins of Modernist Aesthetics," *College Literature* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 38.
- 14 Fortunato, "Willean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread," 48.
- 15 Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics* (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, 1965), 44.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), 159.
- 17 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 991.
- 18 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1029.
- 19 Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism," 153.
- 20 Andrew Bowie, "What comes after art?," *The new aestheticism*, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.) (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 72.
- 21 Bowie, "What comes after art?," 80.
- 22 This is not a new theory. See Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (Part I), and Matthew Arnold's





- "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," where it becomes clear that Wilde's "critic" is far less revolutionary or "new" than most critics have heretofore argued.
- 23 Robert Eaglestone, "Critical knowledge, scientific knowledge and the truth of literature," *The new aestheticism*, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.) (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 156-7.
- 24 Beardsley, Monroe C., *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 401.
- 25 Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 403.
- 26 Andrew Benjamin, "Including Transformations: notes on the art of the contemporary," *The new aestheticism*, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.) (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 210.
- 27 Richard J. Finneran, "Introduction," *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems*, Richard Finneran (ed.) (Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Co., 1970), 5.
- 28 T.R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1965), 221.
- 29 Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, 80.
- 30 Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W.B. Yeats* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1960), 204. See also Richard Finneran, *The Man and the Masks*. (New York: Macmillan, 1948); F.A.C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958); T.R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd edition (London: Methuen, 1965); and Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1964).
- 31 Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 458.
- 32 John Unterecker, *A reader's guide to William Butler Yeats* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959), 169.
- 33 F.A.C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958), 241.
- 34 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980), 189.
- 35 Yeats wrote in his memoirs, "If Rossetti was a subconscious influence [on members of the Rhymers' Club], and perhaps the most powerful of all, we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy." In fact, Yeats—again in his memoirs—even recalls Wilde's devotion to Pater. Wilde told Yeats, "I never travel anywhere without Pater's essay on the Renaissance, that is my golden book, but the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written—it is the very flower of the Decadence" Cited from W.B. Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: Memoirs*, Denis Donoghue, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 22.
- 36 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1045.
- 37 Pater, *The Renaissance*, 189.
- 38 Daniel Duane, *Caught Inside: A Surfer's Year on the California Coast* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 99.
- 39 Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 459.
- 40 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1031.
- 41 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1031.
- 42 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1031.
- 43 F.A.C. Wilson celebrates Byzantium as "a very apt symbol for the Platonic heaven" in *W.B. Yeats and Tradition*, 231.
- 44 16 April 1930, Ursula Bridge (ed.), *W.B. Yeats and T.S. Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953), 162.
- 45 R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, The Arch-Poet* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 402.
- 46 Bridge, *W.B. Yeats and T.S. Moore*, 164.
- 47 Foster, *The Arch-Poet*, 402.
- 48 G.S. Fraser, "Yeats's Byzantium," *Critical Quarterly*, II (Autumn, 1960), 258-259.
- 49 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1038.
- 50 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 360.





- 51 Duane, *Caught Inside*, 45.
- 52 Further structural parallels exist among the three poems. The lines of "The Old Men" mirror each other, much like the water acts as a mirror for the old men—and as "Byzantium" acts as a mirror for "Sailing to Byzantium." In fact, the image chains of the two Byzantium poems are actually reversed: they appear 'sea,' 'fire,' 'bird' in the first poem, and 'bird,' 'fire,' 'sea' in the sequel. Each image in the Byzantium poems has a counterpart like each line in "The Old Men": lines one and seven; two, six and nine; three and eight; and lines four and five. The lines that mirror each other are similar in meter, rhyme, and imagery. Lines one and seven are identical, "I heard the old, old men say." The central theme of the poem is the old men's lament. Lines two, six, and nine are all short lines that introduce the idea of change and reinforce that idea with an image of water, a substance in constant flux: "Everything alters," "By the waters," and "Like the waters." 'Alters' and 'waters' solidify the connection between these lines via rhyme. Lines three and eight continue the mirroring trope: "And one by one we drop away" is metrically the same as "All that's beautiful drifts away." Both lines engage the issue of fleeting youth, comparing the old men dying to a river's constant flow; each is impossible to stop as time slips away—away being the perfect rhyme that ends each line also solidifies their mirrored connection. Finally, lines four and five complete the reflection motif through matching meter, an ending couplet, and in their description of the old men as old, twisted figures found by the waters. These two lines compare the men to a clawed creature, presumably clutching a stone or a branch as it leans in for a drink; the men are in a similar posture as they lean in to gaze at their reflections. The men are also referred to as 'old thorn-trees' that line the banks of a river, their twisted trunks tortured by the constant reflection of the water. From a young sapling to an elder rotting stump the tree has seen its beauty 'drop' and 'drift away.' Ultimately, we see Yeats struggling with aesthetic questions early in his career (this poem appears in *In the Seven Woods*, 1904): Does art beget art? What defines an art object? And perhaps most importantly, does art make any material difference to life?
- 53 Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," 1205.
- 54 A version of the poem containing an extra stanza was on his desk when he died
- 55 J.C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*, (New York: Macmillan, 1926).
- 56 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 982.
- 57 Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art*, 219.
- 58 Allan Gullette, "Towards a Philosophy of Holism," <http://alangullette.com/essays/philosophy/holism.htm> (accessed August 16, 2007).
- 59 W.B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 68. We should note that Heraclitus of Ephesus's (ca. 535-475 BCE) concept of 'Becoming,' in which ontological opposites are seen as fundamentally interrelated, is a holistic theory. Yeats's understanding of the universe's organization as integrated opposites in the form of 'Concord' and 'Discord' gyres, and his reliance on Heraclitus's theory of 'Becoming,' points towards holistic aesthetics.
- 60 While I do not support an interpretation of *Ulysses* based on authorial intention here, it is interesting to note Joyce's hope that the novel could serve a cultural purpose.
- 61 Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses,' and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), 69.
- 62 Joughin and Malpas "Introduction" (2003), 9. See also the work of Jürgen Habermas, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Oscar Wilde for similar notions of modernity. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert supports a holistic aesthetic, claiming: "It seems to me that with the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to realize, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and so to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity."
- 63 What Gilbert describes is Yeats's theory of the *Spiritus Mundi* (the interconnectedness of human consciousness) introduced in line 12 of "The Second Coming."

